

It’s a Matter of Justice! The Old Testament and the Idea of Retribution

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ABSTRACT

This essay aims to do justice to an often misunderstood aspect of the concept of biblical – in this case, Old Testament – justice, namely the doctrine of retribution. Following on some introductory matters regarding the terminology, the various facets of the Old Testament idea of retribution will be presented: individual retribution, collective and corporative retribution, and transgenerational retribution. Moreover, God’s role within the Old Testament ‘doctrine of retribution’ will be dealt with. Finally, it will be shown that, in some instances, Old Testament authors also have highlighted some risky sides of this ‘doctrine of retribution’.

Keywords: Old Testament theology, retribution, justice

A INTRODUCTION

One of the topics that runs like a thread through Prof. Gerrie Snyman’s academic career is his search for justice and a ‘just’ world, a concern that is genuinely reflected in many of his publications. Moreover, Professor Snyman has also unceasingly devoted himself to a ‘just’ approach of the Bible. In his book *Om die Bijbel anders te lees. ’n Etiek van Bybellees*, he puts it as follows: “What kind of reading does justice to the text against its historical background?”¹ It is therefore not without reason that in the same book Snyman warns against “exegetical arbitrariness”.²

In this essay, which I warm-heartedly dedicate to Professor Snyman, I will try to do justice to an often misunderstood aspect of the concept of biblical – in this case Old Testament – justice itself, namely the so-called ‘doctrine of

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¹ Gerrie Snyman, *Om die Bybel anders te lees. ’n Etiek van Bybellees* (Pretoria: Griffel, 2007), 60: “Watter soort lees laat geregtigheid aan die teks in sy historiese omstandighede geskied?”.

² Snyman, *Om die Bybel anders te lees*, 40: “Eksegetiese willekeur”.

retribution'. Therefore, in what follows, I will argue that the Old Testament doctrine of retribution in its divergent aspects is inspired by a predilection for justice. However, before dealing with it, one major misunderstanding regarding the concept of 'retribution', in particular linked to English usage of the term, has to be eliminated.

In English, the noun 'retribution' only seems to be used in a negative way, as *The Collins Cobuild English Dictionary's* definition illustrates: "Retribution is punishment for a crime, especially punishment which is carried out by someone other than the official authorities".³ This exclusive negative interpretation, however, is not legitimate, if one takes into account the etymology of the word. English 'retribution' is derived from Latin 're-tribuere'. Its prefix 're-' denotes the reciprocal aspect ('back'), while the verb 'tribuere' literally means 'to pay'. As such, literally, 'retribution' means 'to pay back'. This paying back, however, can be both positive and negative. In the first case, retribution is synonymous to 'recompense, reward' ([because] of a good action), while in the second, it means 'to punish / punishment' ([because] of an evil action).

The hope and desire that good will be rewarded and evil will be punished is one of the most basic fundamentals of humanity. This is clearly expressed in the opening paragraph of the article on 'retribution' in the prestigious *Supplément au Dictionnaire de la Bible* (DBS): "The desire for recompense, as a reward for an action considered good (Greek *misthos*), and as a punishment for an evil action, belongs to the fundamental experiences of human existence".⁴ Given this definition, it should not come as a surprise that the theme of recompense also plays a central role in the Old Testament as existential literature par excellence.⁵ Nevertheless, while the definition provided by the DBS might seem easy – reward or punishment for a good or bad action – it is not at all easy to determine the use of this concept within the Hebrew Bible.

Although the above presentation of the principle of 'retribution' – in what follows, I will continue to make use of the word against the background of its etymology – seems extremely simple (rewarding good deeds and punishing wrongdoings), one has to note that this omnipresent doctrine of retribution is anything but a clearly defined 'doctrine' within the Old Testament. On the contrary, within biblical literature, the idea of retribution emerges as a complex

³ E.g., John Sinclair, ed., *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2001), 1325.

⁴ La Direction, "Rétribution," *Supplément au Dictionnaire de la Bible* 56 (1982): 582–586, esp. 582: "Le désir d'une rétribution, en récompense pour une action considérée comme bonne (grec *misthos*), en punition pour une action mauvaise, appartient aux données fondamentales de l'existence humaine."

⁵ Jože Krašovec, *Reward, Punishment and Forgiveness. The Thinking and Beliefs of Ancient Israel in the Light of Greek and Modern Views* (Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 78; Leiden – Boston – Köln: Brill, 1999), xvii.

idea, with many nuances.⁶ No clear definition is given anywhere. Moreover, although the concept of ‘retribution’ seems to be omnipresent in the Old Testament, it should be noted that there is no precise terminology to express it. In contrast to modern languages, Hebrew lacks a specific term for ‘retribution’. Hebrew therefore always expresses the idea using several neutral terms, the meaning of which depends largely on their context.

First, there is the term גמול / גמל, which Koehler-Baumgartner translate as ‘retribution’ (‘Vergeltung’)⁷ referring to Isa 35:4; 66:6; Jer 51:6; Ps 28:4; 94:2; 137:8; Prov 19:17; Joel 4:4.7; Ob 15; Lam 3:64. According to G. Sauer, the term גמולה equally can have the nuance of ‘retribution’.⁸

In Gerleman’s view, also the term שלם can express the notion of ‘retribution’.⁹ He refers, among others, to Gen 15:16, but also to Mi 5:4; Isa 53:5 and Ps 37:37. According to him, even in Isa 9:5, the formula שלום שר (traditionally translated as “Prince of Peace”) should be translated as “Prince of retribution”.¹⁰ In some texts, the two terms mentioned above (שלם and גמל) are combined. Thus, in Ps 137:8, the author exclaims, addressing the city of Babylon: “Happy shall they be who pay you back (שׂיִשְׁלֶם) what you have done to us (גְּמוּלָךְ שֶׁגַּמְלָה)!”.

⁶ See, a.o. Georg Freuling, ‘*Wer eine Grube gräbt...*’ *Der Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang und sein Wandel in der alttestamentlichen Weisheitsliteratur* (Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament 102; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2004); Bernd Janowski, “Die Tat kehrt zum Täter zurück. Offene Fragen im Umkreis des „Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhangs“,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 91 (1994): 247–291; Jan T. Nelis and André Lacocque, “Rétribution,” in *Dictionnaire encyclopédique de la Bible* (ed. Pierre-Maurice Bogaert et al.; Turnhout: Brepols, ³2002), 1121–1124. Ka Leung Wong, *The Idea of Retribution in the Book of Ezekiel* (Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 87; Leiden – Boston – Köln: Brill, 2001), 1–30; Ernst Würthwein, “Die Vergeltungsglaube im Alten Testament,” *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* 4 (1942): 710–718.

⁷ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Hebräisches und aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament. Dritte Auflage* (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2004), 189.

⁸ See e.g. 2 Sam 19:3: When king David proposes Barzillai, who has helped him to cross over Jordan river, to accompany him to Jerusalem, Barzillai answers the king: “Why should the king recompense me with such a reward (גְּמוּלָה)?”. Cf. G. Sauer, “art. גמל,” *Theologische Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament* 1 (1971): 426–428, esp. 428. See equally Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebräisches und aramäisches Lexikon*, 189. This interpretation has been contested by Seybold, who translates גמולה by ‘favor’ (“Warum erweist mir der König diese Gunst?”). See Klaus Seybold, “art. גמל,” *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* 2 (1977): 24–35, esp. 29.

⁹ Gerrit Gerleman, “art. שלם,” *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament* 2 (1976): 919–935, esp. 925: “Genugtuung haben, genug haben, befriedigt sein bzw. negativ Vergeltung (Strafe) tragen, büßen”.

¹⁰ Gerleman, “art. שלם”, 930: “Fürst der Vergeltung” or “Fürst des Tributs”.

A third term should be mentioned as well, namely נקם/נקמה. Despite its primary meaning of ‘revenge’, this word also connotes the idea of ‘retribution’. In this respect, Koehler-Baumgartner distinguish between ‘human vengeance’ and ‘divine retribution’.¹¹ Nevertheless, such a distinction is not always clear, as it is shown in Ps 94:1, where, according to the NRSV, God is presented as an avenger: “O LORD, you God of vengeance (אל נקמות)”

Fourthly, the noun שכר (‘salary’, ‘reward’) can be used as a term for expressing the notion of retribution. It occurs in this sense, for example, in Prov 11:18 (“Those who sow righteousness get a true reward”).

The authors of the DBS article mention two other terms that would express this notion: פקד, referring mainly to punishment,¹² and תמורה / מור, being rarer and referring mainly to exchange,¹³ hence their connotation of ‘retribution / reward’.¹⁴

Finally, the verb שוב, which occurs very frequently in the Hebrew Bible, seems, sometimes, also to have this meaning of ‘retribution’. Thus, when Joseph’s brothers see that their father has died (Gen 50:15), they say to themselves: “What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong (והשב ישיב לנו את כל הרעה) we have done to him!” This verb equally can be associated with גמל, as in Joel 4:7 (“I will turn your deeds back [השבתי גמלכם] upon your own heads”).

The foregoing survey has made clear that the Hebrew language does have some (neutral) terms that can be used with the meaning of ‘retribution’.¹⁵ Nevertheless, it is only through a reading of the Old Testament that the various facets of the concept can be identified, even though the general presentation ‘one who does good, finds good’ and ‘evil harms’ essentially conveys what is at stake. Thus, the establishment of an unambiguous definition of the concept of

¹¹ Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebräisches und aramäisches Lexikon*, 681: “1. menschliche Rache (...) 2. göttliche Vergeltung”. Similar to גמל, the word נקם also can be associated to the term שלם. See, e.g., Deut 32:35: לי נקם ושלם (“Vengeance is mine, and recompense”).

¹² See, e.g., Exod 20:5: “I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing (פקד) children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me”.

¹³ See Lev 27:10: “And if one animal is substituted (המר) for another”.

¹⁴ See Job 15:31: “Let them not trust in emptiness, deceiving themselves; for emptiness will be their recompense (תמורתו)”.

¹⁵ For its implications on the Greek rendering of the concept in the Septuagint translation, see Hans Ausloos, “« Il rétribuera les œuvres de l’homme selon ses actions » (Sir 35,24). La notion de « rétribution » dans la Septante,” in *«Retribution» in Jewish and Christian Writings. A Concept in Debate* (eds David Hamidović, Apolline Thommas, and Matteo Silvestrini; Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 492; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 27–41, esp. 33–37.

'retribution' in the Old Testament is virtually impossible. This does not imply, however, that within the history of Old Testament exegesis, attempts to define the concept would be lacking. The definition of Pax, for example, is quite simple: retribution is "the divine rewarding or punishing reaction to good or bad acts of men".¹⁶

In what follows, and drawing on the scholarly literature on the subject, I will attempt to articulate the various facets of the Old Testament idea of retribution. It should be stressed, however, that the elements that will be reviewed are not necessarily always and simultaneously present. After all, as mentioned, the notion of retribution is a pluriform and complex concept.

B RETRIBUTION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT: A MULTICOLOUR CONCEPT

As the preceding paragraph has made clear, retribution actually is a re-action that either can be positive (reward) or negative (punishment). This double attitude is also prominent within Old Testament literature: just as one is convinced that bad deeds can or must be punished, one also assumes that good deeds (must) be rewarded – that's what justice asks for. Because of the fact that the Old Testament is in essence religious literature, Old Testament 'retribution' is – at least implicitly – related to God. As such, it does not surprise that, in general terms, Old Testament 'retribution' is often related to the concepts of divine blessing and curse: whoever does good is blessed, and experiences this in his practical life; whoever breaks God's commandments is cursed.

The book of Deuteronomy in particular plays this register. For instance, on the eve of the taking possession of the Promised Land, the author of Deut 11:13-15 puts the following words into Moses' mouth in order to motivate Israel to pursue good things:

¹³If you will only heed his every commandment that I am commanding you today – loving the LORD your God, and serving him with all your heart and with all your soul –¹⁴ then he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil;¹⁵ and he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you will eat your fill.

In contrast, if the Israelites break God's commandments, a series of curses awaits them. To name but a few, Deut. 28:17-20 functions as a good example:

¹⁷ Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. ¹⁸ Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, the increase of

¹⁶ E. Pax, "Studien zum Vergeltungsproblem der Psalmen," *Studium biblicum franciscanum. Liber Annuus* 11 (1960/61): 56–112, esp 62: "Die lohnende und strafende *Reaktion Gottes* auf die guten und schlechten Taten der Menschen".

your cattle and the issue of your flock.¹⁹ Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out.²⁰ The LORD will send upon you disaster, panic, and frustration in everything you attempt to do, until you are destroyed and perish quickly, on account of the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken me.

The list of curses which Israel can expect when it trespasses God's commandments seem endless: God will afflict Israel with pestilence, fever, inflammation, heat and drought, boils, ulcers, scurvy and itch, confusion of mind, blindness and madness. And this is only a selection of the curses that will hit the Israelites, according to Deut 28:21-44 if they act against God's will.

It is clear how according to Deuteronomy – and almost all Old Testament texts have the same tenor – retribution for good and evil is almost always conceived of as earthly. Reward for good deeds, as well as punishment for bad ones, is to be expected during earthly life, not during an eventual afterlife. Nevertheless, despite the fact that virtually the entire Old Testament agrees on earthly retribution – in both a positive and a negative sense –, there are many variants here as well. These divergent presentations on 'retribution', moreover, lead to the question whether, within the Old Testament, an evolution of this concept can be found. For example, the editors of the DBS have suggested that with the "deuteronomic movement (...) the Bible moved from the idea of automatic retribution where acts lead to results in a sometimes almost magical way (...) to a more theological conception where it is God who personally sanctions human acts".¹⁷ In any case, it is not easy to point out such a development. Although it is likely that the notion of retribution has been subject to a diachronic evolution, it is also possible that several views have circulated simultaneously. It all depends on which 'theology' or 'anthropology' one adheres to. Moreover, as it will be dealt with later in this article, in some circles, there was an awareness of the serious problems inherent in the classical doctrine of retribution.

C INDIVIDUAL RETRIBUTION

Several Old Testament texts deal with an individual form of retribution. The person who does something good or bad is rewarded or punished for it individually. When Lot's wife disobeys the divine prohibition to look back during the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, only she herself turns into a pillar of salt (Gen 19:15-26). Myriam, Moses' sister, is punished by God with leprosy in person for her opposition to her brother (Num 12:1-10). And when a certain Uzza takes hold of the ark of God at the moment that it is brought to

¹⁷ Nelis and Lacocque, "Rétribution," 583: It has been "avec le mouvement deutéronomique que la Bible est passée de l'idée d'une rétribution automatique où les actes produisent leur fruit d'une manière parfois presque magique (...) à une conception plus théologique où c'est Dieu qui sanctionne personnellement les actes humains".

Jerusalem, God punishes him alone for this offence: Uzza falls down dead (2 Sam 6:6-7). In Exod 32:33, this individual retribution is put in the mouth of God: "Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book". Moreover, it will be no surprise that individual retribution is particularly well represented in Old Testament legal texts. For example, in Exod 21:14, one reads: "But if someone willfully attacks and kills another by treachery, you shall take the killer from my altar for execution".

In Wisdom literature, too, individual retribution often occurs, as e.g. in Sir 28:2: "Forgive your neighbour the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray". A few chapters further, Sirach says: "He who disciplines his son will profit by him" (Sir 30:2). Also, in the book of Proverbs, this individual idea of retribution can be found: "Whoever is steadfast in righteousness will live, but whoever pursues evil will die" (11,19).

This principle of individual retribution does not pose many problems, not even to contemporary readers of the Bible. On the contrary, as already argued, it is considered normal and a sign of (divine) justice that those who do good should be rewarded for it, while the evil-doer should be punished for his bad deeds. More problematic, however, becomes the issue when retribution becomes collective and concerns an entire community.

D COLLECTIVE AND CORPOPAL RETRIBUTION

In addition to the texts that deal with individual retribution, there are numerous Old Testament passages in which retribution concerns the entire community. Here, however, a distinction must be made between what is called 'collective retribution' on the one hand and 'corporate retribution' on the other.¹⁸ Collective retribution is actually a variant of the individual one: an entire community is rewarded or punished for something for which the entire community is responsible.¹⁹ As such, only those who have done something right or wrong themselves are rewarded or punished. For example, Gen 6:5-8 tells how God decides to eradicate mankind because of man's wickedness. In Gen 19:4, one reads that God destroys the whole city of Sodom because of the behaviour of the Sodomites, "both young and old, all the people to the last man". In 2 Kings 17:7-8, the downfall of the kingdom of Israel is also indicated as "because the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. They had worshiped other gods and walked in the customs of the nations whom the LORD

¹⁸ Vincent S  n  chal, *R  tribution et intercession dans le Deut  ronome* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift f  r die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 408; Berlin – New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 125–126.

¹⁹ As to the notion of collective retribution, see in particular Jo  e Kra  ovec, "Is There a Doctrine of 'Collective Retribution' in the Hebrew Bible?," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 65 (1994): 35–89, esp. 35.

drove out before the people of Israel, and in the customs that the kings of Israel had introduced.”

Unlike collective retribution – that, as such, only is a plural form of individual retribution –, the corporative variant rewards or punishes the whole community, even if not every member of the community is directly and personally involved or responsible. In this case, retribution is given in the name of the solidary responsibility of the group, based on the idea that each individual member represents the whole group. In Old Testament literature, this form of retribution occurs frequently. In some texts, for instance, the downfall of Israel is seen as the result of the sinful behaviour of its ruler. In 1 Kings 14:16, for instance, one reads that God “will give Israel up because of the sins of Jeroboam, which he sinned.” Also, when, after the destruction of Jericho, a certain Achan appropriated forbidden goods, God became angry with the Israelites, and allowed the inhabitants of Ai to defeat the Israelites. Only after Joshua’s intervention does God agree that only the guilty Achan, with his property – including “his sons and daughters, with his oxen, donkeys, and sheep” (Josh 7:24) – should be punished. And when King David, against God’s will, organises a census, God lets the plague loose on Israel, causing the death of seventy thousand people (2 Sam 24:1-17).

A classic example of this form of retribution – and the response to it – is also found in Num 16. Here it is recounted how, during the wilderness journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, Korah, Datan and Abiram, together with two hundred and fifty leaders of the community, rebelled against Moses and Aaron – and thus against God. When all the community is present at the tent of meeting, and there sees the “glory of the LORD”, God speaks to Moses and Aaron as follows: “Turn away from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of theirs, or you will be swept away for all their sins”. Thanks to Moses’ and Aaron’s intervention, God finally spares the Israelites; only Korah, Datan and Abiram and their followers perish.

Even if contemporary people do consider this corporative variant of retribution often as ‘unjust’, examples of it in actual society are legion. How could one otherwise characterise the (economic) sanctions of nations against other nations because of the misbehaviour of their leaders and some of their citizens? Notwithstanding the fact that innocent people often become victims of these sanctions, this retribution is considered ‘just’, at least by the one who executes the punishment.

E UNRIPE GRAPES AND STIFF TEETH

In the above-mentioned examples, retribution was always directed at the perpetrator and/or his contemporaries. In other words, retribution has been immediate. However, this is not always the case. In Old Testament literature, retribution can also be passed on to the next generation(s). In this case, we speak

of 'transgenerational retribution'.²⁰ Again, different variants can be discerned. Sometimes, children are punished or rewarded for what their parents have done. Then, even several generations will feel the consequences of the behaviour of their ancestors.

This transgenerational retribution can be found most clearly in the Ten Commandments: for those who turn to idols, God is a "a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation" (Exod 20:5). For those who keep the commandments, on the other hand, God shows his goodness "to the thousandth generation" (Exod 20:6; see also Num 14:18; Jer 32:18). Against the background of this central text, it is not surprising that, in John 9, when meeting the born blind man, Jesus' disciples ask him: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind" (v. 2).

Even if this type of retribution may, at first sight, seem strange and even unjust to contemporary readers, it is not entirely alien to life. As already mentioned, biblical texts were written by authors who stood with their feet in daily reality. They, too, experienced how, from a purely material point of view, many generations could sometimes enjoy the memory of a progenitor who had succeeded, has become rich and even succeeded in building a real empire – in Old Testament terms, "blessed by God". Just as in today's public opinion, children and grandchildren often are associated with the misdeeds of their ancestors, and even have to bear the consequences of their parents' mistakes directly, or, on the contrary, can profit from their ancestors' success and wealth.

People mostly feel uncomfortable with this trans-generational retribution. After all, a child is not responsible for the actions of his parents, and, therefore, cannot be punished (or rewarded) for them. Even in ancient Israel, people sometimes had difficulty with this form of retributive thinking. This becomes clear, for example, in Ezek 18.²¹ Here, the prophet fulminates against the Israelites who, in order to explain the misery of the exiles, appeal to the saying, "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (v. 2 – a variant is quoted in Jer 31:29). Even though Ezekiel's protest was primarily intended to emphasise that reversal is always possible after evil deeds (v. 21), just as good deeds offer no certainty of salvation if one subsequently goes astray (v. 26), he was also convinced that, if one does not repent, only the person who

²⁰ Sénéchal, *Rétribution et intercession*, 126.

²¹ On Ezek 18, see, in particular, Johan Lust, "The Sour Grapes: Ezekiel 18," in *Scripture in Transition. Essays on Septuagint, Hebrew Bible, and Dead Sea Scrolls in Honour of Raija Sollamo* (eds Anssi Voitila and Jutta Jokiranta; Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 126; Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2008), 223–237. Lust concludes: "Ezekiel's opponents like that idea: the children of the exiles have to suffer because of the sins of their fathers. The prophet, voicing the Lord's point of view, rejects this theory when applied to the moral level. Each generation, and each person, is responsible for their behaviour" (237).

sins shall die. After all, "a child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child; the righteousness of the righteous shall be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own (Ezek 18:20).

F GOD AS THE REVENGER OR RETRIBUTION AS RESULT OF AN IMMANENT ORDER?

Although in the foregoing examples, God has always been presented as the judging agent, who retributes for good and evil, even within biblical literature, God is not always seen as the retributing subject. Retribution also can be 'automatic' or 'mechanical'. It is, in particular, the German Old Testament scholar Klaus Koch who has drawn attention to this idea.²² He even held the view that, within Old Testament literature, God was originally not presented as the one who retributes good and evil. In Koch's view, according to the Old Testament authors, an action inevitably had a consequence, without necessarily involving an external figure who judges good and evil.²³ According to him, retribution is not 'divine', but 'mechanical' or 'automatic'.²⁴ For example, Koch referred to Prov 29:6: "In the transgression of the evil there is a snare, but the righteous sing and rejoice". Or to Prov 11:19: "Whoever is steadfast in righteousness will live, but whoever pursues evil will die". Furthermore, one can refer to the proverb "Whoever digs a pit will fall into it" (Prov 26:27). Or, in the same vein, the author of Prov 22:8 says: "Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity".

Does this mean that, in Koch's view, God does not play a role at all? No, on the contrary: God – as a kind of watchmaker who has put the world together in this way –, is at the origin of this principle of action and consequence.²⁵ This

²² Klaus Koch, "Gibt es ein Vergeltungsdogma im Alten Testament?," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 52 (1955): 1-42; Id., "'Sein Blut bleibe auf seinem Haupt' und die israelitische Auffassung vom vergossenen Blut," *Vetus Testamentum* 12 (1962): 396-416.

²³ Koch, "Sein Blut," 397: "Der lexikalische Befund läßt sich kaum anders erklären, als daß nach israelitischer Auffassung aus der bösen Tat gleichsam wie von selbst Krankheit und Not entstehen, wie aus der guten Tat Gesundheit und Wohlergehen. 'Entstehen' ist – genau genommen – schon zuviel gesagt, denn die Kategorie von Ursache und Wirkung ist bei einer solchen Betrachtungsweise zunächst überhaupt nicht im Spiel. Vielleicht mehr ist die Sünde das Verderben des Sünders, wie die Guttat die Wohltat des rechtschaffenen Menschen ist".

²⁴ See also Sénéchal, *Rétribution et intercession*, 124-125: "Une action mauvaise provoque une accumulation mécanique et inévitable d'autres maux sur le coupable". God is nothing more than "le maître d'un système dont il se contentait de laisser le mécanisme fonctionner par lui-même".

²⁵ According to Koch, God's role is limited to the "in-Kraft-setzen und vollenden des Sünde-Unheil-Zusammenhangs bzw. des Guttat-Heil-Zusammenhangs" (Koch, "Gibt es ein Vergeltungsdogma," 7). Or: "Jahwe setzt diese Zusammenhänge in Kraft, indem

is clear, for example, from Ps 7:16-18. The ‘immanent order’ that is expressed in vv. 15-17 (“They make a pit, digging it out, and fall into the hole that they have made. Their mischief returns upon their own heads, and on their own heads their violence descends”) the psalmist refers in v. 18 to God’s justice: “I will give to the LORD the thanks due to his righteousness”. According to Koch, it was only with the Greek translation – the so-called Septuagint – from the 3rd century BCE onwards that this presentation of God as an external redeemer was systematically introduced. On this point, however, Koch somehow jumps to rash conclusions. After all, through many of the texts already mentioned, not at least those in the book of Deuteronomy, it has become clear that within Old Testament thought, God does indeed – and in the majority of cases – appear as the authority who rewards good and punishes evil, who blesses and curses.²⁶ Moreover, Koch’s presentation could give the impression that a straightforward evolution within Old Testament thinking on retribution can be found. This, however, is unlikely. Not only is the (relative) dating of biblical texts highly controversial within the current state of research. Moreover, the hypothesis of an evolutionary development within retributive thinking ignores the possibility that different competing views could also circulate simultaneously, as the example of Ezek 18 has shown.

G RETRIBUTION: A RISKY CONCEPT

At the beginning of this essay, it was argued that the motif of ‘retribution’ for good and evil is not at all unworldly or outdated, but, on the contrary, has been inspired by a desire of justice, even if its presentation in many Old Testament texts is often difficult to contemporary readers. At the same time, this ‘doctrine of retribution’ also has a very weak and even dangerous side. From the sense of justice already mentioned, one finds it only natural that good deeds should be rewarded and evil punished, if not by an external authority. Conversely, this means that one could think – as many Old Testament texts do – that those who are well off have also lived well, and that those who are in misery owe this to their own badness. It is not for nothing that many pastors of self-established, mostly evangelical and fundamentalist churches are often only too happy to show off the wealth they have managed to accumulate. After all, this wealth is the best proof for their followers that God has resolutely chosen the side of these misleading leaders, and that their excessive possession is the sign that God’s blessing rests upon them.

er die Tat am Täter wirksam werden läßt, sie auf ihn zurücklenkt und vollendet” (*Ibid.*, 31).

²⁶ See a.o. Josef Plöger, *Literarkritische, fromgeschichtliche und stilkritische Untersuchungen zum Deuteronomium* (Bonner Biblische Beiträge 26; Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1966), 196–212. See also J.G. Gammie, “The Theology of Retribution in the Book of Deuteronomy,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 32 (1970): 1–2.

If, as the 'doctrine of retribution' suggests, happiness and wealth are attributed to good behaviour, then the question naturally arises as to whether the poor, the sick and those confronted with misfortune are themselves to blame for their poverty, sickness and unhappiness. There are also texts in the Old Testament that make this justified comment. Qoh 8:14 summarises it as follows: "There are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous".

In the book of Job, too, the author wrestles with this question. More than that, the entire book revolves around the theme of an unjustly suffering man – Job – and the question of how this suffering man relates to God. In the search for the answer that the author of the book of Job gives to these questions, we must, however, be careful. After all, the book of Job is by no means unequivocal in its answer, and everything depends on how we read and interpret it. Within the book of Job, two sections can be distinguished. The style in which they are written alone makes this clear. The first two chapters of Job, as well as the last verses of the last chapter (Job 42:7-17) are narrative texts, whereas the central part of the book is almost exclusively poetic. Both parts – the narrative section in Job 1–2; 42:7-17 on the one hand and the poetic section in Job 3–41 on the other – are not compatible in their views. In the narrative part, the traditional 'doctrine of retribution' – he who does good, meets good – prevails. In the extensive poetic middle section, on the other hand, Job resists his suffering and the prevailing idea of retribution. It should come as no surprise that an overly pious reading of the book of Job, which seeks to use the book to persuade the believer to accept suffering and to surrender himself faithfully to it as coming from God, concentrates mainly on the narrative passages. For if one limits oneself exclusively to the narrative parts of Job, leaving aside the poetic middle section, one may get the impression that the book mainly wants to defend the traditional 'doctrine of retribution', rather than trying to nuance it or challenge its limits. A short discussion of the text will make this clear.

In the first verses of the book, Job is presented as someone who was "blameless and upright". Moreover, he "feared God and turned away from evil". According to the classical 'doctrine of retribution', therefore, Job was supposed to have prospered. And that is how the following verses portray it: "There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants; so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east" (Job 1:2-3). But then disaster strikes: Job's cattle are plundered; his servants murdered; his sheep, goats and shepherds are killed; and his children die when a whirlwind causes the house in which they are feasting to collapse. And if that would not be enough, Job is also struck in his own body by "loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head" (Job 1:7). However, nowhere does Job's misery lead him to turn against God. On the contrary, Job remained

faithful to God: "In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong-doing" (Job 1:22). Even when he was struck in his own body, he proclaimed: "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" (Job 2:10). And twice, the author emphasises Job's persistence in his sincerity and faith in God.

When one continues reading the last verses of the book immediately after the prologue, then the traditional 'doctrine of retribution' even seems to become true. For, "the LORD restored the fortunes of Job (...); and the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before. (...) The LORD blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; and he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys. He also had seven sons and three daughters. (...) In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job's daughters (...). After this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children's children, four generations. And Job died, old and full of days" (Job 42:10-17). Job's faithfulness and his acceptance of suffering seem to bear fruit. The Septuagint translation of Job even goes a step further. After verse 17, there is an addition in the Greek text: "And it is written that he will raise again with those the Lord raises up"²⁷. This plus in the Greek text adds another dimension to the 'doctrine of retribution', which has not been discussed until now. Apparently, there was a tendency within ancient Israel – or is the Septuagint addition in Job 42 about the resurrection rather of a Christian nature? – to let the 'doctrine of retribution' play out even beyond death.²⁸ It goes without saying that such a reading can misuse the book of Job to legitimise mankind's suffering: whoever does the right thing, especially accepting suffering as 'divine', will one day be rewarded for it.

This, however, goes entirely against the intention of the book of Job as it stands. After all, the poetic middle section of the book is precisely one big protest against such an interpretation. For whatever explanation the 'friends' of Job may put forward – suffering as a punishment or as a divine pedagogical instrument – there is no explanation for Job's suffering, that Job himself perceives as extremely unjust.

²⁷ Translation by Claude E. Cox, "Job," *A New English Translation of the Septuagint and the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included under That Title* (eds Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright; New York – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 696. On the idea of resurrection in Job, see Hans Ausloos "A man shall not rise again...". Job 14:12 in Hebrew and Greek" *Septuagint, Sages, and Scripture. Studies in Honour of Johann Cook* (eds Randall X. Gauthier, Gideon R. Kotzé, and Gert J. Steyn; Supplements to *Vetus Testamentum* 172; Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2016), 159–171, esp. 166–169.

²⁸ On posthumous retribution, see Nelis & Lacocque, "Rétribution," 1123.

H CONCLUSION

The desire for retribution – positive or negative – is one of the fundamental characteristics of humanity. As such, it should come as no surprise that the so-called ‘doctrine of retribution’ – rewarding good deeds and punishing wrongdoings – has also found a central place in biblical literature. After all, the biblical texts are not alien to life. On the contrary, they are rooted in everyday life, in which common sense plays a central role. One of the aims of biblical literature is to urge people to live a good life and to avoid evil. The idea of retribution can undoubtedly serve this purpose. In addition, the ‘doctrine of retribution’ has a central idea in mind: a just world. Nevertheless, caution is required. To counterbalance the impression that ancient Israel had a conclusive unified ‘doctrine of retribution’, this essay has highlighted the multifaceted nature of the concept within biblical literature. And even though each of us, to a greater or lesser degree, is not displeased with the idea of retribution – good deserves reward, evil deserves punishment – the Old Testament already confronts us with its limits: not all misfortune is the result of crime, just as not all wealth and happiness are the result of good behaviour. Old Testament authors were also well aware of these possible excesses of this idea of retribution.

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